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ABSTRACT

To understand the myths and assumptions upon which most people's knowledge of themselves is constructed, there must first be a way to identify them that releases the individual from their control. Thus, a new way of knowing is needed. A new way of knowing requires a new means of interpreting, which stems from a discovery of assumptions and a re-examination or "re-visioning" of those assumptions. The study of gender roles and their cultural prescriptions provides fertile ground for this re-visioning process. A false feminine vision has imposed an impossible standard by which American women are asked to judge themselves. According to the writer Susan Faludi, this false feminine vision has proven very disturbing, and its consequences make a fresh examination necessary. Students should be exposed to the findings of researchers who challenge such feminist backlash myths as male shortages, the infertility epidemic, female depression, daycare crises, and the plight of misfit single women, and should be given opportunities for inquiry, discovery, analysis, and re-vision of culturally mandated myths. A time capsule project asking students to explore popular culture's notions of gender roles across many decades would engage students in all of these processes. For this project, student groups are assigned a decade for which they must prepare a time capsule that represents the gender roles dictated by the popular culture of that decade. After the project is prepared, the groups must try to answer certain critical questions about the capsule, focusing on the nature of the myths and assumptions represented. Through projects like this, a new way of knowing within an explicitly feminist perspective can be achieved in the classroom. (Fourteen footnotes are included.) (HB)

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USING FEMINIST THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM: DISCOVERING NEW WAYS OF KNOWING

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USING FEMINIST THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM: DISCOVERING NEW WAYS OF KNOWING

All too often we are content to receive experiences just as they are presented to us, thereby creating and perpetuating myths that direct and constrain our thought and behavior. However, as Adrienne Rich notes, "Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves."[1] But in order to understand these assumptions and myths, there must first be a way to identify them that releases us from their control. Thus, a new way of knowing is needed. A new way of knowing requires a new means of interpreting, which stems from 1) a discovery of assumptions, and 2) a re-examination or "re-visioning" of those assumptions.[2] The study of gender roles and their cultural prescriptions provides fertile ground for the analysis and application of this discovery and re-visioning process. Using feminism as the focus, this paper will address the nature, techniques, and justification of a new way of knowing.

The basic agenda of feminism, as explained by Susan Faludi, is this: "It asks that women not be forced to 'choose' between public justice and private happiness. It asks that women be free to define themselves--instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men."[3] These certainly sound like generally acceptable requests in the 1990's, but as Faludi suggests, "The fact that these are still such incendiary notions should tell us that American women have a way to go before they enter the promised land of equality."[4] This grim outlook

prompted Faludi to discover what have been the stumbling blocks in the battle for the rights of women. What Faludi uncovered in her examination of women's struggle was even grimmer still, for as she explains:

> The truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious . . . [it] proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall.[5]

The wisdom of the antifeminist backlash strikes a blow at the very heart of feminism. Essentially, the backlash thesis claims that equality, the result of the women's movement, is the cause of women's problems, as seen in Faludi's description of the backlash argument:

> Women are unhappy precisely **because** they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation. They have grabbed at the gold ring of independence, only to miss the one ring that really matters. They have gained control of their fertility, only to destroy it. They have pursued their own professional dreams--and lost out on the greatest female adventure.[6]

The impact of this backlash, as Faludi argues, is that it "remarkets old myths about women as new facts and ignores all appeals to reason," thereby creating a "false feminine vision" that has "become the impossible standard by which American women are asked to judge themselves."[7]

This false feminine vision is very disturbing from many angles--educational, cultural, social, and ethical. The inaccuries and misconceptions of this vision have constrained our ability to accurately interpret our experiences and to make well founded choices about our

actions. Consequently, we must set out to discover the assumptions and myths in which we are drenched, not for the primary purpose of justifying positions, correcting wrongs, or propagating cycles of changes, but instead, to build a new foundation for understanding both the feminine and masculine gender. With this goal in mind, we need to discover the ways in which gender roles are created, perpetuated, and "mandated" by culture.

Faludi's investigation and research findings offer insightful contributions to use as a springboard for further examination and analysis of gender roles, feminism, and the myths of antifeminist backlash. Faludi develops the argument that such backlash myths as male shortages, the infertility epidemic, female depression, daycare crises, and the plight of misfit single women have been created, perpetuated, and disseminated as cultural "mandates" through the popular culture arenas of the media, movies, television, fashions, and the beauty industry.[8] According to Faludi, these backlash myths propelled women toward cocooning (nesting at home), mommytracking, and becoming new traditionalists in the 1980's, essentially defeating all the gains that the women's movement had achieved.[9]

Our students need to be exposed to such findings as Faludi's research provides if we are to hope that our future is not destined to be plagued by myths, lies, and convoluted thinking about gender roles. If students are given opportunities for inquiry, discovery, analysis, and re-vision of culturally mandated myths, then our future holds a brighter promise.

A time capsule project that asks students to explore popular culture's notions of, and attitudes toward, gender roles across many decades would engage students in all of these processes.

After lecture/discussions of gender roles and the influence of popular culture, divide the class into groups of five or six students. Next, have each group choose a particular decade in American history since 1950 that they wish to research and study for several weeks. They should study the entire decade they have chosen. Their project is to prepare a time capsule in which they provide representative examples of the traditional gender roles dictated by the popular culture of that decade.[10] The time capsule can be formatted and presented in a variety of ways.[11] In their research for this project, students will undoubtedly discover numerous myths, although they will need some guidance in distinguishing the differences between myths and reality. An ongoing dialogue between teacher and students is essential to the development of appropriate thinking and worthwhile application of thought. Students, with the teacher's guidance, should inquire, discover, and analyze the source of the myths they uncover, much like Faludi has done in her research. Students within each group can divide their tasks by individual focuses on the popular culture arenas of the media (print, electronic, popular literature, advertising), movies, television, fashions, and the beauty industry.

At this point, the project seems complete and worthwile as it stands. But Adrienne Rich would not agree. In her view, "Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival."[12] Rich further elaborates by claiming that:

> A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the

> past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.[13]

It would seem appropriate, as well as beneficial to both the feminine and masculine gender, to engage in the process of re-visioning so that old myths can either be shed or seen in a new light. Here again the teacher must be prepared to guide students in a critical thinking process. Knowing the source of the myth being discussed is only the starting point. As Faludi demonstrates, it is important to then examine the actual facts versus the misconceptions and/or outright falsehoods. Students need to be pressed to answer a series of questions that require serious investigation and critical thinking such as: 1) What are the assumptions and myths being created? 2) How does the popular culture create these myths? 3) In what ways does the popular culture misrepresent or even falsify what really is the case? 4) How can cultural prescriptions be redirected to a more fitting and accurate representation of reality?

The learning environment that is created by these types of thoughts, questions, and processes encourages students to shed their roles as simple "consumers of experience", and to take on new roles as "sovereign individuals", able to separate "pre-packaged notions" or myths from realities.[14] Faludi's powerful arguments and research more than justify the need for a new way of knowing. The time capsule and re-visioning project presented herein is one example of how to get to a new way of knowing.

This paper has established a justification for a new way of knowing within a feminist perspective. A rationale for re-examining gender roles has been offered that serves as a starting point for an

inquiry about, discovery of, and analysis concerning the various myths associated with gender roles created and perpetuated by our popular culture. Students will benefit from the historical, cultural, and linguistic study that is required by the making of a gender role time capsule. Further benefit will stem from their analysis and re-visioning of gender roles. Ultimately, students will benefit not only from a better understanding of gender roles and the influence of culture, but they will hopefully learn a new way of discovering and defining their individual selves.

ENDNOTES

[1]Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", in Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers, eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 484.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1991), xxiii.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., xviii.

[6]Ibid., x.

[7]Ibid., xxii, 57.

[8]Ibid., 75-226.

[9]Ibid., 3-111.

[10]Faludi provides numerous examples of how gender roles are created and mandated by the various popular culture arenas.

In examining the **media**, students may turn to articles found in Newsweek; US News and World Report; The Nation; Time; Fortune; Forbes; Life; Saturday Evening Post; People; NY Times; Wall Street Journal; McCalls; Redbook; Good Housekeeping; Mademoiselle; Voque; Cosmopolitan; Ladies' Home Journal, etc. Students should be concerned with what messages and images are being conveyed in magazine and newspaper articles. Students will discover articles focused on women's condition, women's identity crises, and women's general unhappiness. Faludi notes, "The press first introduced the backlash to a national audience--and made it palatable. Journalism replaced the 'pro-family' diatribes of fundamentalist preachers with sympathetic and even progressive-sounding rhetoric. It cosmeticized the scowling face of antifeminism while blackening the feminist eye." Faludi, 77. During the decade of the 1980's, Faludi explains, "Three contradictory trend pairs, concerning work, marriage, and motherhood, formed the backlash media's triptych: Superwoman 'burnout' versus New Traditionalist 'cocooning'; 'the spinster boom' versus 'the return of marriage'; and 'the infertility epidemic' versus 'the baby boomlet.'" Faludi, 80.

In examining the **movies**, students may turn to any number of representative movies including "Little Women"; "Adam's Rib"; "His Girl Friday"; "The Good Mother"; "Surrender"; "Baby Boom"; "Working Girl"; "Pretty Woman"; "An Unmarried Woman"; "Fatal Attraction", etc. Students should be concerned with the themes being generated, the assumptions being expressed, and the impressions conveyed in the movies that help to perpetuate cultural dictates for gender roles. As Faludi explains, "By the '50's, the image of womanhood surrendered had won out, its emblem the knock-need and whispery-voiced Marilyn Monroe . . . Strong women were displaced by good girls like Debbie Reynolds and Sandra Dee.

Women were finally silenced in '50's cinema by their absence from most of the era's biggest movies, from 'High Noon' to 'Shane' to 'The Killing' to 'Twelve Angry Men.' While women were relegated to mindless how-to-catch-a-husband movies, men escaped to womanless landscapes." Faludi, 115. "The backlash," according to Faludi, "shaped much of Hollywood's portrayal of women in the '80's. In typical themes, women were set against women; women's anger at their social circumstances was depoliticized and displayed as personal depression instead; and women's lives were framed as morality tales in which the 'good mother' wins and the independent woman gets punished." Faludi, 113.

In examining **television**, students should study the primetime lineups of each decade. Such shows as "Queen for a Day"; "Our Miss Brooks"; "My Friend Irma"; "My Little Margie"; "Make Room for Daddy"; "Leave It To Beaver"; "The Dick Van Dyke Show"; "The Mary Tyler Moore Show"; "Cagney and Lacey"; "Thirty Something"; "LA Law"; "Designing Women"; "The Golden Girls"; "Molly Dodd", etc. can be studied to discover once again the assumptions and themes being generated that help to shed insight on culturally determined gender roles. Faludi suggests that programming choices are also important to examine. For example, "In the '80's, women began to shrink and dwindle in the 1985-86 season, as a new breed of action-adventure series that included women only as victimized girls began crowding out more balanced fare." Faludi, 143. But as Faludi further explains, "Women's disappearance from prime-time television in the late '80's repeats a programming pattern from the last backlash when, in the late '50's and early '60's, single dads ruled the TV roosts and female characters were suddenly erased from the set." Faludi, 143. In reference to the '50's, Faludi states that "every program with a single woman in the lead had been canceled. And the unwed heroine would remain out of sight throughtout the early and mid-1960's, appearing only as an incidental character, a reminder to female viewers of the woes of unwed life. In the many doctor **and** hospital shows of the '60's, single women surfaced only as patients, their illnesses typically caused by some 'selfish' act--getting an abortion, having an affair, or most popular, disobeying a doctor's orders." Faludi, 156.

In examining **fashion**, students can look at popular magazines and newspapers, costume/clothing history books, and television shows to determine the trends in clothing during each decade. Students should determine how fashions create certain images of women, how fashions reinforce a culturally determined role/status of women, and how fashions induce particular anxi**eties in women.** Students should be able to easily identify such images as the meek female, the angelic girl, the virtuous Victorian lady, the sexually liberated woman, the practical efficient mother, the career oriented business-woman, etc. Of particular interest is Faludi's focus on the intimate apparel explosion sparked by Victoria's Secret, et.al., in the 1980's. According to Faludi, "In every backlash, the fashion industry has produced punitively restrictive clothing and the fashion press has demanded that women wear them. When the fashion industry began issuing marching orders again in the '80's, its publicists advanced a promotional line that downplayed the domineering intent and pretended to serve women's needs." Faludi, 173.

In examining the **beauty** industry, students can examine what feminine traits are celebrated, what psychological states are targeted and exploited, and what overall images are being promoted. Faludi notes, "In times of backlash, the beauty standard converges with the social campaign against wayward women, allying itself with 'traditional' morality; a porcelain and unblemished exterior becomes proof of a women's internal purity, obedience, and restraint. By contrast, athleticism, health, and vivid color are the defining properties of female beauty during periods when the culture is more receptive to women's quest for independence." Faludi, 203-204. Students can look to advertisements, as well as magazine articles, and television shows to see the cosmetics and fragrances promoted in each decade. Students can also examine the way in which these items get promoted. For example, what do de-aging treatments and cosmetic surgery say about cultural assumptions and myths?

[11]Students will be able to collect far more items than would fit into a typical time capsule. So it is wise to allow each group to have some latitude in the design and format of their materials. Some groups may choose to use a variety of methods in packaging their presentation. A multimedia format is certainly desirable. Actual items can be collected, pictures and ads from magazines can be clipped, clothing can be sketched, excerpts from television shows and movies can be included, etc. But the emphasis should be on quality of the information gained from these items, rather than simply collecting a huge quantity of items that present the exact same kinds of information.

[12]Rich, 483-484.

[13]Ibid., 484.

[14]Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature", in Bartholomae and Petrosky, 461-476.